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SUBJECT: MORE JOURNALISTS BEATEN AS FREEDOM HOUSE PANS
RUSSIA

Classified By: Pol Minister Counselor Alice Wells; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: On May 3, the U.S.-based NGO Freedom House released its report on freedom of speech worldwide in 2008, ranking Russia 174th out of 195 countries and designating Russia's media environment as "Not Free." The report pointed to government pressure on journalists, a large proportion of state-controlled media, self-censorship, and unsolved murders of journalists in Russia. GOR and human rights contacts questioned the report's efficacy as an advocacy tool for domestic government critics, given its numerical ranking system that placed Russia below such countries as the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nonetheless, civil society activists agreed that trendlines remained poor, as violent attacks on journalists in Russia continue, with the latest assault, against "Korruptsiya i Prestupnost" editor Vyacheslav Yaroshenko, occurring on April 30 in Rostov-on-Don. End Summary.

Freedom House pans Russia

12. (U) On May 3, the U.S.-based NGO Freedom House (FH) released its report on freedom of speech worldwide in 2008, ranking Russia 174th out of 195 countries. The report asserted that Russia's media environment is steadily worsening with each passing year (its rank was 170th in 2007, and 165th in 2006). Freedom House grouped countries into three categories: Free, Partially Free, and Not Free, the latter of which included Russia. Explaining Russia's low ranking, the report pointed to government pressure on journalists, a large proportion of state-controlled media self-censorship, and unsolved murders of journalists. According to the report, Russia has less freedom of speech than such countries as the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

GOR and NGO reps alike question the report's logic

13. (C) Commenting on FH's ranking system, Human Rights Watch Russia Office Director Allison Gill told us on May 7 that it "presumably has some internal logic," but that she didn't see a reason for it, as the relative ranking "distracts" observers from the individual merits and/or problems of a given country. Yuriy Dzhiblادze, director of the Center for the Development of Human Rights and Democracy, agreed with this assessment, telling us on May 7 that "the Freedom House ratings are not taken too seriously here," either by the GOR or among the NGO community. He said that the reports "are not seen as deep or thoughtful," and that the report's comparisons "do not reflect the relative situations" in different countries. According to Dzhiblادze, it is absurd to say that Russia, where print and Internet media daily abound with harsh criticism of the government, has less press freedom than the UAE, where impolitic Internet sites are blocked and where it is impossible to find a single negative word in print about the ruling family. He added that the FH

report "is actually counterproductive" to activists' goal of persuading the GOR to listen to human rights criticism, as "it gives the impression that all human rights issues are politicized and simplistic." Roman Koshayev of the MFA's Human Rights Division reflected this view, rejecting the FH report in its entirety and telling us that "it exists for the purpose of advancing some people's Russophobic goals." Koshayev pointed out that FH receives about 80 percent of its budget from the U.S. government.

14. (C) Both Gill and Dzhibladze stressed that, qualitatively, they agreed that Russia suffers from serious problems in the area of media freedom. Dzhibladze said that "the overall dynamic of the report is accurate," and that he agreed with the report's comparisons of trendlines within a particular country from year to year. Igor Yakovenko of the Public Expertise Foundation (who left the Russian Union of Journalists in February after an internal dispute over his anti-GOR stance), said that "the basic theses in this rating are correct," although "some of Freedom House's methods are very subjective." All of the contacts with whom we spoke attributed Russia's low rating to the problem of violence against journalists, and impunity for the attackers.

Meanwhile, violent attacks continue

16. (U) Indeed, even as the report came out, attacks on journalists in Russia have continued. The latest assault took place on April 30 in Rostov-on-Don, where Vyacheslav Yaroshenko, editor of "Korrupsiya i Prestupnost" (Corruption and Crime), was found unconscious with head wounds and spent

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five days in a coma. His deputy editor, Sergey Sleptsov, asserted that Yaroshenko was attacked because of his reporting on the corruption of Rostov law enforcement agencies. (Note: Sleptsov himself suffered a beating in 2007 that placed him in the hospital, after reporting on a case in which authorities released an alleged criminal charged with kidnapping and robbery. End note.) Rostov authorities first announced that Yaroshenko had received his injuries in an outdoor fistfight, and then changed their story and claimed that he injured himself by falling down some stairs after drinking.

17. (C) Nadezhda Azhgakhina of the RUJ told us May 6 that she and her colleagues in the Union of Journalists were certain that this attack was connected with Yaroshenko's work. She said that the RUJ is "very concerned" about this and other recent attacks, and said that they planned to bring the issue to the attention of federal authorities as soon as possible. She added that they are talking to their RUJ colleagues in the regions in order to develop a plan of action for supporting and showing "serious solidarity" with journalists under attack. This plan, Azhgikhina said, would be unveiled at a June 15 gathering on press freedom sponsored by UNESCO.

18. (U) The Yaroshenko attack joins an increasingly lengthy list of attacks on journalists in 2009, including the following:

-- On March 30, Sergey Protazanov, editor of "Grazhdanskoye Soglasie" (Civic Understanding) in Khimki, was found unconscious near his home with bruises from an apparent beating, and died the following day. Police claimed he died as a result of something that he ate. Grazhdanskoye Soglasie was the last of three independent papers shut down in Khimki, one of which was Mikhail Beketov's Khimkiskaya Pravda; Beketov spent five months in a coma after a vicious beating in November.

-- On March 20, three unidentified assailants beat Maksim Zolotarev, editor of the independent newspaper Nova Yuzhnoye Podmoskovye in the Moscow region, which had published critical articles about local politicians.

-- On March 5, Vadim Rogozhin, managing director of the

independent media holding company Vzglyad in Saratov, whom the RUJ website calls "one of the few Saratov publishers with a principled human rights position," entered the hospital in critical condition after two assailants struck him on the head and knocked him unconscious.

-- On February 3, neighbors found 73-year-old Yuriy Grachev, editor of the pro-opposition weekly Sonechnogorsky Forum in the Moscow region, lying unconscious in the entrance of his apartment building with multiple injuries and covered in blood.

In all four instances, authorities refused to open an investigation as to the perpetrators of the attacks, and in some cases asserted that the journalist in question had not been attacked at all.

Comment

19. (C) As our contacts noted, a quick survey of Russia's print and electronic media on any given day yields a far more complex picture than the one that the "Not Free" assessment suggests. Nonetheless, the steady pace of violent attacks on journalists, and authorities' response to them -- feckless at best, collusive at worst -- itself testifies to the long road that Russia still must travel to achieve full press freedom. We will continue to monitor all of the above cases, and to provide updates as we learn more information.

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